

“My Teacher Michael and I” By Steven Bucky Butler

I can remember when I first walked into the old iO Theater like it was yesterday. Small and tight cornered, I felt cramped with my large frame. Historically, all my improv and writing experiences were in the large walls of The Second City, another local comedy theater and school. When I found my way to iO, it was a bit of a culture shock. This new environment felt old and rusty compared to the more corporate Second City. I tried to push through my anxiety and uncertainty as I tried to assimilate to these new surroundings. Little did I know, I would soon meet someone who would help me call iO my new home.

While waiting for a workshop to start, my attention was drawn to man being assisted into the building. The man struggled with his walker. It turned out the man in the walker was the leader of the workshop. Little did I know, I was meeting the person who would become my favorite teacher and mentor.

The man was Michael C. McCarthy. Michael C. McCarthy, like myself, was an alumnus of The Second City who also flocked to iO. Michael was a prolific writer, with credentials to match. Some highlights of his career included writing for Saturday Night Live and Sesame Street. He developed the Comedy Lab at the iO Theater. I knew I was fortunate to be in his workshop. Unfortunately, by the time I was able to meet him; he was battling cancer. The cancer was visibly debilitating as Michael needed the walker to get around.

When I first met Michael, I felt he didn't like me that much because I asked too many dumb questions. But honestly, I don't really know if he did not like me at first. However, when I took his TV Pilot class at iO Theater, our relationship and understanding for each other really began.

At the time I was working a TV pilot script called. “51 Heroes”. Michael provided good feedback to improve my script. Additionally, he helped me stage a live reading of my script at iO Theater. I remember preparing for that staged reading. Michael kindly guided me to reserve the theater space and audition actors for the reading.

The day of the live stage reading I was nervous. Michael calmed my nerves with casual conversation. Since this was a special night, my Mom and Grandma drove in from the suburbs to see the show. Michael was about to introduce the show, but all I could think about was the fact my Mom and Grandma had not made it into the theater yet. I asked Michael if he could stall the introduction and he was a bit annoyed. He decided the show must go on, but in true Michael fashion, he tied “Welcome, mom and grandma” into the introduction as they entered the theater at that final moment. The crowd laughed and giggled which brought complete levity to the situation. This was typical of our relationship, me annoying Michael and Michael finding a way to tolerate me. I feel he understood my Aspergers. I am grateful to him for giving me this special moment.

I asked Michael if he could give me an old Sesame Street script he wrote, and he said yes. How kind is that? Unfortunately, I never got the script because it was in the attic of his house and not easy to get to. Besides, he was fighting for his life, so we both agreed to let that go.

I rode in on a dingy Metra train to attend one of the last Writer’s Workshops he taught. I entered the old iO Theater and as usual I was the first person there. Michael was there getting ready for the workshop, so we had time to catch up. I checked on his wellbeing. He walked with a cane, so it appeared his health was improving. We chatted again after the workshop, but the time was cut short because I had to catch a train to go home. Little did I know, that was the last time I would see him.

Sadly, as you might have guessed Michael eventually passed away from cancer. Michael died during COVID, so his memorial was over Zoom. The memorial is something I'll never forget and I'm glad I attended. My teacher, my mentor touched so many lives. Celebrities and fellow Second City alumni Tim Meadows and George Wendt were there and told stories of how Michael impacted their lives too. To me, Michael was a kind person who did a lot for many people. I caught him in the tail end of his life, but I think fate brought me to meet him. Hell, Michael wrote for two of my favorite shows Saturday Night Live and Sesame Street.

How I wish Michael was still here. Michael was Second City's first intern. I wish he was here so I could tell him I have landed my first internship in the industry. I feel Michael would be proud of this fact.

I will be forever grateful for our last text exchange in which I explained what he meant to me as a teacher and a mentor. Michael responded, "Thank you Steven, it means a lot that you would say this.... but don't count me out yet. I look forward to seeing you again in the not too distant future! All the best, Your fan, Michal." The fighting spirit of this man still amazes me.

From time to time, I read our last words together and get teary eyed and sometimes even out right cry. I'm honored to be fan of Michael, but even more touched to know he was a fan of me. That'll always make my day. Rest in peace Michael and I hope we'll meet again someday. From one fan to another.

THE END